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Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS Different Goals Different Targets

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Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different goals, different targets

By: Daniel L. Byman

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Chairman King, Ranking Member Higgins, distinguished members of the subcommittee, and subcommittee staff, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

The Islamic State's influence and model are spreading. Even in many Muslim countries where the Islamic State does not have a strong presence, its rise is radicalizing their populations, fomenting sectarianism, and making a troubled region worse.¹ The Islamic State's successes in Syria and Iraq alarmed many observers in Washington and prompted the Obama administration to overcome its longstanding hesitation to become more militarily involved in Iraq and Syria. But there is one person for whom the Islamic State's rise is even more frightening: Ayman al-Zawahiri. Although the Al Qaeda leader might be expected to rejoice at the emergence of a strong jihadist group that delights in beheading Americans (among other horrors), in reality the Islamic State's rise risks Al Qaeda's demise. When Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi rejected Al Qaeda's authority and later declared a caliphate, he split the always-fractious jihadist movement. The two are now competing for more than the leadership of the jihadist movement: they are competing for its soul.

Who will emerge triumphant is not clear. However, the implications of one side's victory or of continuing division are profound for the Muslim world and for the United States, shaping the likely targets of the jihadist movement, its ability to achieve its goals, and the overall stability of the Middle East. The United States can exploit this split, both to decrease the threat and to weaken the movement as a whole.

My testimony today will focus on comparing Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. I argue that Al Qaeda and its affiliates remain a threat to the U.S. homeland, while the Islamic State's danger is more to the stability of the Middle East and U.S. interests overseas. Much of their rivalry involves a competition for affiliates, with both trying to spread their model and in Al Qaeda's case to ensure its operational

relevance. For now the Islamic State's focus is primarily on Iraq and Syria and to a lesser degree on other states in the Muslim world, particularly Libya. In the United States and in Europe it may inspire "lone wolves," but it is not directing its resources to attack in these areas, and security services are prepared for the threat. Al Qaeda is weaker and less dynamic than the Islamic State, but the former remains more focused on attacking the United States and its Western allies.

My testimony is organized into four sections. I first offer some general background on the origins of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. I then discuss the threat profiles for each group, assessing both their strategies and tactics. The third section looks at the struggle to win over affiliate groups in the Muslim world. I conclude my testimony by discussing the policy implications and recommendations for the United States.

The Diverse Origins of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State

Al Qaeda emerged out of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s. As the Soviets prepared to withdraw, Osama Bin Laden and a few of his close associates—high on their perceived victory over the mighty Soviet Union—decided to capitalize on the network they had built to take jihad global. Bin Laden's vision was to create a vanguard of elite fighters who could lead the global jihad project and bring together the hundreds of small jihadist groups struggling, often feebly, against their own regimes under a single umbrella. By the mid-1990s, he wanted to reorient the movement as a whole, focusing it on what he saw as the bigger enemy underwriting all these corrupt local regimes: the United States. For local jihadists, pledging allegiance to Bin Laden and adopting the Al Qaeda brand meant obtaining access to a wide range of assets: money, weapons, logistical support, expertise, and, of course, training—Al Qaeda training camps were the Ivy Leagues of jihadist education.

The 1998 attacks on two U.S. embassies in Africa, and of course 9/11, made Al Qaeda's brand a household name. The attacks demonstrated the power, capabilities, reach, and sheer audacity of the organization. But although the 9/11 attacks electrified the global jihadist movement and raised Al Qaeda's profile on the global stage, the U.S. counterterrorism response that followed was devastating to both Al Qaeda and the broader movement it purported to lead. Over the next decade, the U.S. relentlessly pursued Al Qaeda, targeting its leadership, disrupting its finances, destroying its training camps, infiltrating its communications networks, and ultimately crippling its ability to function. It remained a symbol of the global jihadist movement, but its inability to successfully launch another major attack against the United States meant that symbol was becoming less powerful. The death of the charismatic Bin Laden and the ascension of the much less compelling Ayman al-Zawahiri to the top leadership position further diminished the power of the Al Qaeda brand.

The Islamic State began as an Iraqi organization, and this legacy shapes the movement today. Jihadist groups proliferated in Iraq after the 2003 U.S. invasion, and many eventually coalesced around Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian jihadist who spent time in Afghanistan in the 1990s and

again in 2001. Though Bin Laden gave Zarqawi seed money to start his organization, Zarqawi at first refused to swear loyalty to and join Al Qaeda, as he shared only some of Bin Laden's goals and wanted to remain independent. After months of negotiations, however, Zarqawi pledged his loyalty, and in 2004 his group took on the name "Al Qaeda in Iraq" to signify this connection. Bin Laden got an affiliate in the most important theater of jihad at a time when the Al Qaeda core was on the ropes, and Zarqawi got Al Qaeda's prestige and contacts to bolster his legitimacy.

Yet even in its early days the group bickered with the Al Qaeda leadership. Zawahiri and Bin Laden pushed for a focus on U.S. targets while Zarqawi (and those who took his place after his death in 2006 from a U.S. air strike) emphasized sectarian war and attacks on Sunni Muslims deemed apostates, such as those who collaborated with the Shi'a-led regime. Zarqawi and his followers also acted with incredible brutality, making their name with gruesome beheading videos—a tactic that its successor organizations would also use to shock and generate publicity. Zarqawi also kept his focus on Iraq and its immediate environs. Despite the fears of U.S. and European security officials, Iraq did not prove an Afghanistan-like incubator for attacks on the U.S. homeland and the West.

Al Qaeda in Iraq's indiscriminate violence—including against its fellow Sunnis—eventually led to a backlash from the Sunni tribes that, when combined with the 2006 U.S. troop "surge" in Iraq, hit the group hard. For Al Qaeda, this was a broader disaster, with the Iraqi group's setbacks and abuses tarnishing the overall jihadist cause. Indeed, in private, Al Qaeda spokesman Adam Gadahn recommended to Bin Laden that Al Qaeda publicly "sever its ties" with Al Qaeda in Iraq because of the group's sectarian violence.

When the Syria conflict broke out in 2011 and electrified the Muslim world, Zawahiri urged Iraqi jihadists to take part in the conflict, and Baghdadi—who had taken over leadership of the Iraqi group in 2010—initially sent small numbers of fighters into Syria to build an organization. Syria was in chaos, and the Iraqi jihadists established secure bases of operations there, raising money and winning new recruits to their cause. Their ambitions grew along with their organization, expanding to include Syria as well as Iraq. Iraqi jihadists, by 2013 calling themselves the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or ISIL) to reflect their new, broader orientation, also faced less pressure in Iraq with the departure of U.S. forces at the end of 2011. In Syria, the group took over swaths of territory, benefiting as the Syrian regime focused on more moderate groups while the Syrian opposition as a whole remained fractious. At the same time, Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki put in place a series of disastrous policies to bolster support among his Shi'a base, systematically excluding Iraqi Sunnis from power. Thus Baghdadi's organization steadily shored up popular support, regained its legitimacy in Iraq, built a base in Syria, and replenished its ranks.

Although the Syria conflict revived the Iraqi jihadist movement, it also eventually led it to split with the Al Qaeda leadership. Zawahiri encouraged the Iraqi affiliate to move into Syria, but he also wanted to

establish a separate group under separate command, with Syrians in the lead to give it a local face. Zawahiri probably also wanted a separate group given his past doubts on AQI's loyalty and wisdom. Jabhat al-Nusra was thus created as the Syrian spinoff. But whereas Zawahiri saw this as a positive development, Baghdadi and other Iraqi leaders feared the group had simply gone native and become too independent, focusing too much on Syria and ignoring Iraq and the original leadership. In an attempt to rein it in and reestablish Iraqi authority over the group, Baghdadi declared Jabhat al-Nusra part of his organization. Nusra leaders balked, pledging a direct oath to Zawahiri as a way of retaining its independence. Zawahiri found this lack of unity frustrating and in late 2013 ordered Baghdadi to accept this decision and focus on Iraq. Baghdadi refused, and declared Jabhat al-Nusra subordinate to him: a move that sparked a broader clash in which thousands of fighters from both groups died. In February of 2014, Zawahiri publicly disavowed Baghdadi's group, formally ending their affiliation.

In June 2014, Baghdadi's forces shocked just about everyone when they swept across Iraq, capturing not only large parts of Iraq's remote areas but also major cities like Mosul and Tikrit, important resources like hydroelectric dams and oil refineries, and several strategic border crossings with Syria. Within a month, the group—now calling itself the Islamic State—would officially declare the establishment of a caliphate in the territory under its control, naming Baghdadi the caliph and “leader for Muslims everywhere.”² Almost overnight, Baghdadi went from being an annoying thorn in Zawahiri's side to a serious challenger to his authority and a threat to his organization's position as the vanguard of the global jihadist movement. Thousands more foreign fighters, inspired by the stunning success of the Islamic State and the bold declaration of a caliphate, flocked to Syria and Iraq to join the fight.

Differing Threat Profiles

The dispute between the Islamic State and Al Qaeda is more than just a fight for power within the jihadist movement. The two organizations differ on the main enemies, strategies, tactics, and other fundamental concerns. As a result, the threat they pose to the United States differs as well.

Although the ultimate goal of Al Qaeda is to overthrow the corrupt “apostate” regimes in the Middle East and replace them with “true” Islamic governments, Al Qaeda's primary enemy is the United States, which it sees as the root cause of the Middle East's problems. By targeting the United States, Al Qaeda believes it will eventually induce the United States to end support for these Muslim state regimes and withdraw from the region altogether, thus leaving the regimes vulnerable to attack from within. Al Qaeda considers Shi'a Muslims to be apostates but sees their killing to be too extreme, a waste of resources, and detrimental to the broader jihadist project. Yet Zawahiri cannot openly oppose sectarianism: it is too popular, and with the sectarian slaughter in the Syrian civil war, too many in the Muslim world find it compelling.

The Islamic State does not follow Al Qaeda's "far enemy" strategy, preferring instead the "near enemy" strategy, albeit on a regional level. As such, the primary target of the Islamic State has not been the United States, but rather "apostate" regimes in the Arab world—namely, the Asad regime in Syria and the Abadi regime in Iraq. Like his predecessors, Baghdadi favors purifying the Islamic community first by attacking Shi'a and other religious minorities as well as rival jihadist groups. The Islamic State's long list of enemies includes the Iraqi Shi'a, the Lebanese Hizballah, the Yazidis (a Kurdish ethno-religious minority located predominantly in Iraq), and rival opposition groups in Syria (including Jabhat al-Nusra, the official Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria).

Ostensibly in response to intervention by the United States and others in the conflict, Western civilians in the region (including journalists and humanitarian aid workers) have also become targets—though the Islamic State saw them as hostile before the U.S. intervention. And now that American military advisers are on the ground in Iraq supporting the Iraqi military, the U.S. military has ostensibly become a primary target for the Islamic State, but the lack of troops within range diminishes this danger.

Al Qaeda has long used a mix of strategies to achieve its objectives. To fight the United States, Al Qaeda plots terrorism spectacles to electrify the Muslim world (and get it to follow Al Qaeda's banner) and to convince the United States to retreat from the Muslim world: the model is based on the U.S. withdrawals from Lebanon after Hizballah bombed the Marine barracks and U.S. embassy there and the "Blackhawk Down" incident in Somalia. In addition, Al Qaeda supports insurgents in the Islamic world to fight against U.S.-backed regimes (and U.S. forces in places like Afghanistan, where it hopes to replicate the Soviet experience). Finally, Al Qaeda issues a swarm of propaganda to convince Muslims that jihad is their obligation and to convince jihadists to adopt Al Qaeda's goals over their local ones.

The Islamic State embraces some of these goals, but even where there is agreement in principle, its approach is quite different. The Islamic State's strategy is to control territory, steadily consolidating and expanding its position. Part of this is ideological: it wants to create a government where Muslims can live under Islamic law (or the Islamic State's twisted version of it). Part of this is inspirational: by creating an Islamic state, it electrifies many Muslims who then embrace the group. And part of it is basic strategy: by controlling territory it can build an army, and by using its army it can control more territory.

The two groups' preferred tactics reflect these strategic differences. Al Qaeda has long favored large-scale, dramatic attacks against strategic or symbolic targets: The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11 are the most prominent, but the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the attack on U.S.S. *Cole* in the port of Aden in 2000, and plots like the 2005 attempt to down over 10 transatlantic flights all show an emphasis on the spectacular. At

the same time, Al Qaeda has backed an array of lesser terrorist attacks on Western, Jewish, and other enemy targets; trained insurgents; and otherwise tried to build guerrilla armies.

Yet although Al Qaeda has repeatedly called for attacks against Westerners, and especially Americans, it has refrained from killing Westerners when it suited its purposes. Perhaps the most notable example of this is found in Al Qaeda's decision on multiple occasions to grant Western journalists safe passage into Al Qaeda safe havens and allow them to interview Bin Laden face to face. Terrorism doesn't work if no one is watching, and in the days before YouTube and Twitter, Al Qaeda needed Western journalists to bring its message to its target audience. Al Qaeda often takes a similar approach to Western aid workers operating in its midst: on at least two occasions, senior leaders of the Al Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra implored the Islamic State to release Western aid workers the Islamic State had captured and were threatening to execute. The leaders of the Al Qaeda affiliate argued that Alan Henning and later Peter Kassig were innocent aid workers who were risking their lives to help ease the suffering of Muslims in Syria and that kidnapping and executing them was "wrong under Islamic law" and "counter-productive."³ Unfortunately, the Islamic State was not swayed by such arguments, and both men were horrifically executed.

The Islamic State evolved out of the civil wars in Iraq and Syria, and its tactics reflect this context. The Islamic State seeks to conquer; thus it deploys artillery, massed forces, and even tanks and MANPADS as it sweeps into new areas or defends existing holdings. Terrorism, in this context, is part of revolutionary war: it is used to undermine morale in the army and police, force a sectarian backlash, or otherwise create dynamics that help conquest on the ground. But it is an adjunct to a more conventional struggle.

In territory it controls, the Islamic State uses mass executions, public beheadings, rape, and symbolic crucifixion displays to terrorize the population into submission and "purify" the community, and at the same time provides basic (if minimal) services: the mix earns them some support, or at least acquiescence due to fear, from the population. Al Qaeda, in contrast, favors a more gentle approach. A decade ago Zawahiri chastised the Iraqi jihadists for their brutality, correctly believing this would turn the population against them and alienate the broader Muslim community, and he has raised this issue in the current conflict as well. Al Qaeda recommends proselytizing in the parts of Syria where its affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra holds sway, trying to convince local Muslims to adopt Al Qaeda's views rather than forcing them to do so. The Islamic State's lesson from Iraq, somewhat incredibly, is that it was not brutal enough.

The Fight for Affiliates

Al Qaeda and the Islamic State both profess to lead the jihadist cause throughout the Muslim world. After 9/11, Al Qaeda began to create affiliates or forge alliances with existing groups, expanding its range but at the same time exposing its brand to the misdeeds of local groups, as happened in Iraq.⁴

As part of its competition with the Islamic State, Al Qaeda has stepped up affiliation, establishing relationships with groups in the Caucasus, Tunisia, and India. The Islamic State is playing this game too, and wherever there is a call to jihad, there is a rivalry. Afghanistan, Algeria, Libya, Pakistan, Sinai, Yemen, and other Muslim lands are part of the competition.

Although attention is focused on the Islamic State, Al Qaeda affiliates have done well in recent months.⁵ In Yemen, AQAP has exploited the chaos there to take territory, freeing imprisoned militants and seizing arms. In Syria, Al Qaeda's affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra has cooperated with other groups to take Idlib, an important advance, as well as other gains.

The Islamic State has gained support from a number of important jihadist groups. Boko Haram in Nigeria and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in Egypt both formally pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and are now considered official affiliates or "provinces" of the Islamic State; as of March 2015, the Islamic State has formally recognized seven provinces, including in Libya, from whence many of its foreign fighters hail, and in Yemen, where it is now in direct competition with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In March, Islamic State supporters in Yemen bombed Houthi mosques, playing on the sectarian war narrative that the Islamic State has long emphasized and Al Qaeda has long sought to suppress—indeed, AQAP immediately issued a statement publicly disavowing any involvement in the mosque bombings. It is difficult, however, to gauge the overall level of Islamic State support. Al Qaeda has historically been fairly quiet for a terrorist group when it comes to claiming and boasting of attacks, while the Islamic State often exaggerates its own prowess and role to the point of absurdity.

What becoming an Islamic State "province" means in practice is difficult to determine. In the past, when an affiliate joined Al Qaeda, it usually took on more regional activities and went after more international targets in its region, but did not focus on attacks in the West. Only one affiliate—AQAP—prioritized striking the U.S. homeland and Europe. The Islamic State's focus remains expansion in the Muslim world, and for now its affiliates are likely to focus there. By taking on the Islamic State label, local groups seem to want to attach themselves to a brand that has caught the attention of jihadists worldwide. They are more likely to embrace the Islamic State's barbarous tactics like beheadings as well as its sectarian orientation. In Afghanistan and Yemen, Islamic State-oriented groups have brutally attacked these countries' Shi'a.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

For now the momentum is on the Islamic State's side. Unlike Al Qaeda, it looks like a winner: triumphant in Iraq and Syria, taking on the Shi'a apostates and even the United States at a local level, and presenting a vision of Islamic governance that Al Qaeda cannot match. Yet this ascendance may be transitory. The Islamic State's fate is tied to Iraq and Syria, and reverses on the battlefield—more likely now that the United States and its allies are more engaged—could over time reduce its appeal.

Like its predecessor organization in Iraq, the Islamic State may also find that its brutality repels more than it attracts, diminishing its luster among potential supporters and making it vulnerable when the people suddenly turn against it.

However, the Islamic State's triumphs so far have profound implications for U.S. counterterrorism. The good news is that the Islamic State is not targeting the American homeland—at least for now. Its emphasis is on consolidating and expanding its state, and even the many foreign fighters who have flocked to its banner are being used in suicide bombings or other attacks on its immediate enemies, not on plots back in the West. Western security services are on high alert against the Islamic State threat.

The bad news is that the Islamic State is far more successful in achieving its goals than Al Qaeda has been: like it or not, the Islamic State really is a “state” in that it controls territory and governs it. Its military presence is roiling Iraq and Syria and the threat it poses extends to Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and especially Lebanon. The thousands of foreign fighters under its banner are post a risk of greater regional instability at the very least, and U.S. officials legitimately fear they pose a counterterrorism problem for the West. Ideologically, the sectarianism it foments is worsening Shi'a-Sunni tension throughout the region. So the Islamic State is a much bigger threat to Middle East stability than Al Qaeda ever was.

The Islamic State's impressive social media efforts and overall appeal also make it better able to mobilize “lone wolves” to attack in the West. Many of these individuals will have had little or no contact with the Islamic State as an organization, but they find its ideology and methods appealing and will act on their own. Ironically, some of these individuals may have preferred to go to Iraq and Syria, but Western disruption efforts make it easier for them to attack at home.

The United States and its allies should try to exploit the fight between the Islamic State and Al Qaeda and, ideally, diminish them both. The infighting goes against what either organization claims to want, and it diminishes the appeal of jihad if volunteers believe they will be fighting the jihadist down the block rather than the Asad regime, Americans, Shi'a, or other enemies. Efforts to stop foreign fighters should stress this infighting. The Islamic State's social media strategy is also a propaganda weakness: because the organization allows bottom-up efforts, it risks allowing the most foolish or horrific low-level member to define the group. Playing up its atrocities, especially against other Sunni Muslims, will steadily discredit the group.

Military efforts matter tremendously beyond the immediate theater of operations. For Al Qaeda, the constant drone campaign has diminished the core in Pakistan and made it harder for it to exercise control over the broader movement. Zawahiri himself is an important target, as he is the last major figure of the original generation of Al Qaeda with a global profile, and he will not be easily replaced. For the Islamic State, defeat on the ground will do more to diminish its appeal than any propaganda

measure. The Islamic State's self-proclaimed mission—establishing and expanding a caliphate—is also a vulnerability. If it fails at this mission by losing territory, its luster will diminish.

The threat to U.S. personnel overseas near conflict zones remains high. Al Qaeda, its affiliates, and local jihadist groups have long put them in their crosshairs, and the Islamic State is likely to do the same. The overall level of risk remains roughly similar, but their manner of death if captured is likely to be more gruesome at the hands of the Islamic State.

Because of the appeal and strength of both Al Qaeda affiliates and the Islamic State, programs to gather intelligence and develop the strength of local regimes (and at times substate groups when the regime is weak or hostile as in the case of Syria) are vital. These must be properly resourced and bureaucratically prioritized. At times U.S. personnel must be deployed in dangerous areas, taking on considerable risk. Particularly important is identifying potential areas of expansion for jihadist groups and working with allies to exert control, nipping problems in the bud. Nigeria, Libya, and Yemen are only a few countries where the problems steadily grew worse but attracted only limited U.S. attention. Because the quality of government matters as well as the amount of control a government exerts, the United States should also encourage political reform in such countries.

Some degree of continued infighting between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State is the most likely outcome. As such, the United States should prepare to confront a divided adversary. The good news is that the fight within may consume most of our adversary's attention; the bad news is that anti-U.S. violence or high-profile attacks in the Middle East may become more intense as each side seeks to outmatch its rival. Yet while spikes in violence may occur, such infighting will undermine their ability to shape regional politics, diminish both movements' overall influence, and ultimately discredit jihadism in general.

¹ This testimony draws heavily on my work with Jennifer R. Williams, particularly "ISIS vs. Al Qaeda: Jihadism's Global Civil War," *The National Interest* (February/March 2015), <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/isis-vs-al-qaeda-jihadism%E2%80%99s-global-civil-war-12304>, and my forthcoming book, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford, 2015).

² "ISIS jihadists declare 'Islamic caliphate,'" *Al Arabiya*, June 29, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/2014/06/29/ISIS-jihadists-declare-caliphate-.html>.

³ Tom Harper, "Alan Henning: Al-Qaeda appealed to Isis to release British aid worker following kidnap," *The Independent*, April 22, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/alan-henning-alqaeda-appealed-to-isis-to-release-british-aid-worker-following-kidnap-9734598.html>; Ruth Sherlock and Richard Spencer, "Senior al-Qaeda jihadist speaks out in defence of Peter Kassig," *The Telegraph*, October 22, 2014,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11181229/Senior-al-Qaeda-jihadist-speaks-out-in-defence-of-Peter-Kassig.html>. The case of Peter Kassig was especially controversial, as it seems Kassig may have actually personally provided emergency medical care to Abu Omar Aqidi, the Jabhat al-Nusra leader who called on the Islamic State to release Kassig, as well as several other jihadists, and because Kassig had converted to Islam during his time working in Syria.

⁴ For more on affiliates and Al Qaeda, see Daniel Byman, "Breaking the Bonds between Al-Qa'ida and Its Affiliate Organizations" (Brookings, 2012) <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2012/7/alqaida%20terrorism%20byman/alqaida%20terrorism%20byman.pdf>.

⁵ For a nice review, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng, "Al Qaeda Is Beating the Islamic State," *Politico*, April 14, 2015.

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